

Background paper on Central Valley Project and federal water allocations

On March 22, Bureau of Reclamation (BOR) will update its Central Valley Project (CVP) water allocation for 2011. BOR operates the CVP, the largest irrigation project in the US. It includes 20 dams and reservoirs, 500 miles of canals and 9 million acre-feet of water storage. BOR began constructing the CVP during the Depression and finished in 1951, bringing 3 million new acres into production (one-third of California's agriculture).

Each year, BOR allocates water to its CVP contractors based on the year's precipitation. BOR makes a series of decisions, beginning in January, estimating the amount of water that each part of the CVP delivery system will receive. At this point, most of the CVP contractors are projected to receive 100% of the amount in their water supply contract with the BOR. Projected allocations to some westside San Joaquin agricultural contractors (who receive most of their water from the bottle-necked Delta) are now 50% and will be raised to 55% in BOR's upcoming announcement (planned for 3/22). These contractors received 40% of their contracted amounts last year under drought conditions.

One of the water districts projected to receive a 55% allocation is the Westlands Water District, headquartered in Fresno and the largest irrigation district in the U.S. Their water supply contract is for 1.15 MAF. They have received this full amount only three times since 1992. To supplement their CVP supply, they also use groundwater and purchase water from other districts.

EPA has no formal role in BOR's water allocation decisions.

EPA has joined BOR as a Cooperating Agency on its San Joaquin River Restoration Program EIS. One of the CVP dams, Friant Dam (above Fresno) diverts 95% of the San Joaquin River, pumping part of it south to Kern County and part to districts on the east side of the valley north of Fresno. These diversions have resulted in the river running dry for 64 miles (in all but flood conditions) and decimation of San Joaquin salmon. In 2006, BOR entered a settlement agreement with environmental groups and the Friant Water District to restore year round flows in the river and restore salmon. This was authorized by the San Joaquin River Restoration Settlement Act of 2009. BOR began introducing flows in 2009 and will reintroduce salmon in 2012. EPA will undergo a review of the BOR's EIS for this program later this year.